

3 Bloomfield Learning Centre, London, England

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1. Context

The Bloomfield Learning Centre (BLC) is a specialist literacy clinic, in Southwark, London. It provides diagnostic assessments and one-to-one teaching for children, aged from seven years to young adults, who are failing at school or unable to partake in further education, due to their inability to read and write fluently. The BLC teaches 84 students per week.

The BLC works primarily with students from socially deprived inner London boroughs. Their parents lack the funds to pay for tutoring and their schools struggle to provide the one-to-one teaching they need. These young people are thus deprived of educational opportunities. At the time of writing, 3.75% of students speak English as a second language.

The BLC is a charity, with no statutory funding. All Sounds-Write lessons are subsidised and 15% of students have full bursaries. Some schools and some parents contribute towards the cost of lessons. The BLC is reliant on donations to cover the budget shortfall.

Students are referred to the BLC primarily by schools or parents, but occasionally by other professionals. During the Covid-19 pandemic, whilst schools were open only to the children of key workers, the usual ratio of school (65%) and parent

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(35%) referrals changed dramatically. Between June 2020 and July 2021, 6% of students were referred by schools and 94% by parents.

On referral to the clinic, students are between two and five years behind in reading and spelling. Through the provision of high-quality teaching, the BLC aims to give them all the opportunity to achieve their academic potential and thus leave school with fluent literacy skills and exam success. The Sounds-Write programme is an essential part of this process. Between September 2018 and July 2019, the average increase in reading age of BLC students was 19.1 months.

2. Implementation

All teachers have Level 7 certification³ in assessing and teaching students with specific learning difficulties, which is considered the highest qualification in this field. Additionally, all teachers are qualified Sounds-Write practitioners. Following the launch of the Sounds-Write programme, the first BLC teacher trained in 2005, followed by the rest of the team between 2006-2008, with new staff training as they joined the team. The Sounds-Write programme is central to our teaching programmes, and is used across all age groups as an intervention strategy.

All BLC teaching is delivered one-to-one, generally for one hour per week. Prior to the pandemic, all lessons were face-to-face, either in the clinic or in schools. During the pandemic, when schools were closed, this model changed. The BLC transferred all teaching online, setting up an online literacy clinic serving students in their homes or, for the children of key workers, in school. Since that time, the BLC has provided both in person and online teaching.

We assess all students referred in order to compile a clear picture of their learning strengths and weaknesses and an individual cognitive profile. This is followed up with a comprehensive written report. Given that all those referred

3. A Level 7 certificate indicates study at Master's level, although it may not be equivalent to a Master's.

to the clinic are struggling with literacy, the primary focus of the assessment is to identify the reason for their struggles. Where appropriate, the assessor will make a diagnosis of dyslexia. The main purpose of the report is to inform teaching and make learning as easy, efficient, and fun as possible. Diagnostic assessments for specific learning difficulties/dyslexia investigate the following areas.

- Background information relating to the child's early developmental history including difficulties at birth, the development of spoken language, and fine and gross motor skills. Any difficulties with hearing and eyesight are also recorded.

This is accompanied by questionnaires completed by the parent and class teacher describing the child's school experience – strengths and weaknesses, acquired skills, learning strategies, motivation, and level of enjoyment.

- General underlying ability (verbal and non-verbal) assessed using the WRIT III (Wide Range Intelligence Test III⁴).
- Literacy attainment i.e. reading accuracy, comprehension, speed and fluency, spelling, and writing proficiency.
- Underlying cognitive skills known to be associated with the acquisition of literacy such as auditory short term and working memory, phonological processing (the ability to process the sounds of one's language) and visual processing speed.

3. Evaluation

In order to demonstrate the impact of using Sounds-Write as a programme of intervention, we are presenting an individual case study: Terry.

4. <https://www.pearsonclinical.co.uk/store/ukassessments/en/wide-range/Wide-Range-Intelligence-Test/p/P100009122.html>

3.1. Social and educational background

At the time of writing, Terry (a pseudonym) was in Year 8. He was referred to BLC, by his primary school, when he was in Year 6.

Terry lives in London with his parents and his brother. The family's first language is English. There is a family history of literacy difficulties. Terry reached his early developmental milestones with no physical or developmental issues noted until he entered school in Reception, aged four years. Terry's mother recalls that during his early years of learning, he struggled "with his phonics" and demonstrated poor handwriting skills; he wrote slowly and struggled with pencil control.

Terry's primary school was of average size with 317 students. It is in a deprived part of London, with 41.8% of children receiving free school meals⁵ (national average: 20.8%), and 60.3% of students did not speak English as their first language (national average: 21.2%).

In September 2020, Terry progressed to a mainstream non-selective secondary school, also in London. Here the percentage of free school meals is 28.8% (national average: 19.3%), and 46% of students achieved Grade 5 or above in English and Maths GCSE⁶ compared to a national average of 43%.

At school, Terry struggled with initial phonics instruction and found learning to read challenging. School provided small group literacy support up to Year 3, but Terry made limited progress.

Whilst in Year 4, school referred Terry to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services for emotional and behavioural issues. This was due to angry and frustrated behaviour that included banging his head against the wall and

5. An explanation for terms followed by an asterisk can be found in the glossary: <https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2022.55.1367>

6. General Certificate of Secondary Education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

throwing things in class. Despite a strong, supportive relationship with his mother, it was clear that Terry was a very unhappy child.

This was followed up in July 2017 with an assessment by the Local Education Authority⁷ Specific Learning Difficulties team. Although Terry was found to have a strong dyslexic profile, he was not given a diagnosis because of his ‘emotional responses’. Therapeutic intervention was suggested, with a recommendation to reassess his educational skills in one year.

3.2. Diagnostic assessment

One year later, in autumn 2019, Terry’s school referred him to the BLC for a diagnostic assessment. This took place when he was ten years and nine months old.

Much of the relevant background information for Terry has already been mentioned, but what became immediately apparent during this initial visit to the BLC was his strong dislike of academic work and an absolute sense of failure, which had led to low self-esteem, significant anxiety, and a dislike of school. He was acutely aware of his failure to learn to read.

Assessment reports and yearly reassessments use the convention of standardised scores in order to measure progress; these are briefly explained below.

In order to calculate a standardised score, the raw score is converted to enable comparison of the individual’s performance with others of the same chronological age. Standardised scores have a mean of 100, with an average range of 85-115. If a standardised score remains the same over time, this means that the student is making normal progress. If a standardised score increases, this means that the student has made more than normal progress. The following descriptors are used for standardised scores (see [Table 1](#)).

7. Local education authorities (LEAs) in England and Wales were responsible for education within their jurisdictions, but have been progressively phased out and their responsibilities moved to local authorities.

Table 1. Descriptors used for standardised scores

Standardised score	Descriptor
131 or more	Well above average
116-130	Above average
111-115	High average
90-110	Mid average
85-89	Low average
70-84	Below average
69 or less	Well below average

The results of the assessment showed that Terry's non-verbal and verbal underlying ability were in the mid average range, showing him to have average academic potential.

In contrast, Terry's literacy scores, assessed using Wechsler Individual Achievement Test 3 (WIAT-3⁸), were strikingly low, showing him to be more than four years behind in reading and spelling. He displayed particular anxiety when asked to write and needed much encouragement before putting pencil to paper. The overall appearance of his writing was immature as he used print rather than cursive script and the speed at which he wrote was well below average (see summary [Table 2](#) below for scores).

Further tests showed that Terry had weaknesses in all areas of phonological processing. He struggled to segment and blend phonemes (speech sounds), performing at the well below average level in both of these areas (Comprehensive Test of Phonological Processing 2 – CTOPP-2⁹).

Terry was given a diagnosis of dyslexia/specific learning difficulty. With transition to secondary school approaching in less than a year, he was immediately identified as a vulnerable student in need of urgent support. This

8. <https://www.pearsonclinical.co.uk/store/ukassessments/en/Store/Professional-Assessments/Academic-Learning/Reading/Wechsler-Individual-Achievement-Test---Third-UK-Edition/p/P100009274.html>

9. <https://www.pearsonclinical.co.uk/store/ukassessments/en/Store/Professional-Assessments/Cognition-%26-Neuro/Memory/Comprehensive-Test-of-Phonological-Processing-%7C-Second-Edition/p/P100009101.html>

is a challenging time for any child; it was obvious that Terry would be unable to cope.

Terry was offered a full bursary at BLC, starting in January 2020. This comprised one-to-one teaching for one hour per week.

3.3. BLC teaching

Based upon the diagnostic assessment, Terry began the Sounds-Write Programme at Unit 6 of the Initial Code*. Given his weakness in phonological processing, the initial focus was on improving the skills required for reading and writing: segmenting, blending, and manipulating phonemes. Terry initially read decodable books at a level that matched his level of skill/ability. This enabled him to practise these vital skills at the text level and engage his interest in the process of reading, thus increasing his confidence.

A typical session involves a range of Sounds-Write lessons, often followed by a game to reinforce the lesson's target/s. Also included would be passage reading from a decodable book, with attention paid not only to accurate decoding, but also vocabulary development and comprehension. Language development has also been a focus in lessons and continues to include oral work in which Terry is encouraged to incorporate new vocabulary.

After six months of tuition, his mother emailed the centre to say,

“Terry has come so far and doing so well since he has been coming to the Bloomfield and I’m really happy how well he is doing. Thank you so much for all what you have done with Terry and how you have made him come out of himself and more confidence he has in himself now”
(July 2020).

Terry started secondary school in September 2020, in more difficult circumstances than anyone could have predicted, during the pandemic. At the time of writing, he has just started Year 8. Not only is he coping, he is actually enjoying a

wide range of subjects. When asked which subjects he likes best at school, he responded, “History, Geography, loads of them!”.

Terry approaches his Sounds-Write lessons at BLC with enthusiasm. He reads with expression, demonstrating good comprehension of the text. When faced with a word he does not recognise, he makes confident use of his segmenting and blending skills, without prompting, and is able to self-correct. At Terry’s final BLC lesson of the academic year he was wearing a badge on his blazer awarded to him for achieving 150 ‘learning points’.

In July 2021, Terry’s mother wrote,

“Terry didn’t get much help in his primary school, that is why Terry needed so much help, I told the school so many time that he is really behind for his age. When Terry was in Year 5 that’s when the school seemed to see how much help he did need, which I was not happy with as it took them that long, they just classed him as naughty child but since he has been coming to Bloomfield I can see the change in Terry a lot and I’m really happy and so grateful for all the help you have giving to him and how far he has come along”.

Terry was reassessed in June 2021 using the WIAT-3, when he was twelve years and four months old; one year and seven months on from his initial assessment.

Table 2. Standardised scores and age equivalents

	November 2019		June 2021		Total gain
	Standardised score	Age equivalent	Standardised score	Age equivalent	
Single Word Reading	60	6 years	70	7 years 8 months	1 year 8 months
Single Word Spelling	58	5 years 8 months	69	7 years 4 months	1 year 6 months
Reading Comprehension	62	6 years			

It is BLC policy to reassess all students' reading attainment and spelling annually. More specific reassessment relating to phonological skills is carried out when considered appropriate in order to inform teaching. This was challenging during the pandemic whilst teaching was online, which also explains why reading comprehension was not reassessed. Standardised scores and age equivalents are displayed in [Table 2](#) above.

3.4. Summary of main results

Terry attended 67 one hour sessions, during school term times, between January 2020 and June 2021. He has made great progress in reading and spelling, but his literacy skills remain below average for his peer group.

Terry's continued attendance at the BLC is testament to his improved motivation, self-image, and resilience. He is now able to cope in school, is making progress across the curriculum, and sees himself as a learner with academic potential. Terry is optimistic about life after school. He currently aspires to work in the film industry either making films or acting.

4. Recommendations

The following recommendations are ideals, or best practice.

- Students with complex needs benefit from one-to-one teaching focussed on their individual needs.
- Start with a thorough diagnostic assessment to establish a starting point in the Sounds-Write programme.
- Students benefit from a variety of short, well-paced activities within each session; use both the Sounds-Write lessons and appropriate games and activities to reinforce learning.

- Provide homework for students to reinforce current areas of learning between Sounds-Write lessons. This would depend on each student, but may include a variety of activities to support the development of skills and code knowledge, such as those in the Sounds-Write or Phonic Books workbooks, or simple card games that encourage practice.
- Regularly reassess in order to monitor progress.
- Cultivate good communication with parents/carers and schools. This includes communicating programmes of work and targets set, and inviting parents and/or teaching assistants to observe Sounds-Write lessons, enabling them to support students through the week by using accurate language and activities.
- Invest in a range of decodable books that sit alongside the Sounds-Write Programme. Send a weekly reading book home.
- Where possible, work as a team, using a variety of means of communication. Develop a way, such as Google Drive, to create a library of shared resources.
- Access continuous professional development provided by Sounds-Write.

These are some challenges faced by the BLC team.

- Communication with schools can be difficult, especially when students have been referred by their parents.
- Parents with poor literacy can find it very difficult to support their children at home.
- Children often come to the clinic having been taught very different ways of thinking about how reading and spelling work. For example, they may have been taught to think about spelling in terms of letter

names, or have imprecise pronunciation of sounds. This inevitably necessitates a certain amount of unlearning before they can truly make progress.

Despite these challenges, we work hard to implement the best practice recommended. As our annual average increases in reading age and Terry's improvement show, one hour per week undoubtedly has a positive impact.



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